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ABSTRACT

It is argued that adult education and educational technology have the potential to catalyze the revitalization of general education, in which the curriculum is focused on the goals of developing the student's ability to solve problems, to make decisions, and to establish values. In support of this claim, it is noted that adult educators have addressed themselves to these goals--and have had the means to achieve them--for decades. It is further noted that educational technology (especially in the form of the "newer" technologies such as computer-assisted instruction and interactive video) has been increasingly used in the past decade to articulate these goals. It is concluded that this revitalization requires professionals in adult education and educational technology to recognize the catalytic potential of their fields within their own programs and institutions and to communicate that potential to others. (5 references) (GL)

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Adult Students, Technology, and General Education: New Tools for Curriculum Reform

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Traditionally, degree programs for adults and the use of telecommunications technologies for instruction have been consigned to the periphery of higher education. Both have held high promise, but, depending on one's perspective, the promise either never has been fulfilled, or its fulfillment never has been recognized by the "mainstream."

There are many reasons for the limited success of adult degree programs and media in the mainstream. Certainly one reason is that they rarely have achieved recognition as part of the infrastructure of higher education. More often, they have been asked to recover their costs directly through student enrollments, a situation that has made innovation a risky venture.

But perhaps a more important reason is that adult degree programs and telecommunications, each in its own way, have been solutions awaiting a problem. No change happens in a vacuum. Change happens in context: the change process itself is part of the environment that is being changed. Innovations, seen in ths context, will not be fully accepted and institutionalized until the environment in which they operate is ready for change. Often, the innovation then becomes a catalyst by which that change occurs. There are several trends afoot in higher education that suggest that

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the environment of higher education is now poised on the edge of major transformation and that educational technologies and adult degree programs could well provide the catalyst that will shape the direction of change.

THE CURRICULUM REFORM MOVEMENT

The warning bell has been sounded by the National Commission on the Role and Future of State Colleges and Universities, which, in 1986, warned, "The storm warnings are unmistakable: our society is troubled, our economy endangered, our democratic values jeopardized, our educational system embattled" (p. 29). The Carnegie Foundation has joined the call. Educators, it said, "are confused about how to impart shared values on which the vitality of both higher education and society depend" (1986, p. 16).

The scope of the transformation that is now underway and, to some extent, its probable direction, can be seen in these and other reports on the state of higher learning in the United States that have been issued over the past few years. While these reports represent varied and often conflicting perspectives on the issues, they are unanimous in calling for the reform of the undergraduate curriculum. This coincides with the reinvigoration of the general education movement, a reform spirit that challenges higher education to reconsider its roots and its fundamental relationship to the society it serves.

One of the first calls for reform came from a National

Institution of Education report entitled "Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education." The report cited excessive vocationalism in education and the weakened ability of colleges to "foster the shared values and knowledge that bind us together as a society" (Scully, 1984, p. 1). Its recommendations should sound familiar to continuing education professionals steeped in the literature of adult education. Its three major recommendations emphasized greater student involvement in the learning process (including more field experiments and experiential learning, simulations, and small-group activities), reforms to ensure that "curriculum content is directly addressed not only to subject matter but also to the development of capacities of analysis, problem solving, communication, and synthesis" (Mortimer, et al., 1984, p. 43), and improved assessment and feedback.

Another report started from a much different set of assumptions and arrived different recommendations, but recognized a similar problem. William Bennett's "To Reclaim a Legacy" report called for a return to the classic liberal arts as a way of re-establishing general education as what all educated people hold in common.

The same year (1985) a third report, "Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community" (American Colleges Committee's Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees, 1985) called for a renewed relationship between the product of education

(knowledge and skills) and the process of education ("modes of access to understanding and judgment" (p. 18)).

Higher education has responded to these challenges. Many, if not most, colleges and universities are now involved in curriculum review of one sort or another. Admittedly, most of the "reforms" go little beyond a reconsideration of distribution requirements, but the opportunity for fundamental reform has rarely been greater. The relevant question is: what does it all mean for adult degree programs and telecommunications programs?

ADULTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

For most of this century, adults have been seen as a secondary "market" for higher education. The rise of adult degree programs, open learning programs, and distance education programs were designed to address the needs of these students without interfering with the mainstream curriculum, which remained geared to the "traditional" eighteen-to-twenty-two-year-old student. Indeed, a good number of new institutions have been created specifically to serve these "nontraditional" students.

These adult programs often reflect the work of Knowles and other adult education theorists. They involve students in both the process and content of courses; they reward experiential learning and life experience; they work to make learning relevant to the immediate environment of the adult student as a worker, parent, and community member; and they draw upon the student's experiences in these social roles.

In short, these peripheral curricula have tackled many of the issues raised by the commission reports and have applied many of the recommended remedies already. However, the effects on the mainstream have, thus far at least, been minimal.

That may change. Adults are increasing as a percentage of the "traditional" student population. More importantly, college and university administrators are discovering the adult student. At some colleges, awareness of the mainstream adult student has occurred through the process of re-evaluating the general education curriculum. At Rhode Island College, to cite one example, general education review led to a heightened concern for how to support the college's growing number of commuting students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT DEGREE PROGRAMS

What does this all mean for the future of adult degree programs? Like most change, it signals both good news and bad news.

The good news is that directors of adult degree programs may have a secret weapon to use in the annual battle to justify their existence. The remarkable coincidence ("coincide-ence" in this case rather than mere chance) of the philosophical thrust of the current general education reform and the underlying philosophy of many external degree programs, combined with the movement of adults into traditional curricula suggests that, of all programs on a traditional campus, the adult degree program is probably best able to serve as a model for institution-wide curriculum

reform. Far from being peripheral, adult degree programs may well be able to become curriculum laboratories, shaping mainstream general education throughout the institution. Assuming astute leadership, this could bring a new stability to these programs, along with a degree of respect and faculty participation unheard of in the past.

The bad news is that, as adults move into th mainstream and as general education reform contributes to a mainstream curriculum that is more relevant to adult students, the separate adult degree program may find itself becoming something of a dinosaur. There is a historical parallel for this bad news. In the last century, some colleges reacted to demands that women be given better access to education by establishing separate programs just for them. These women's degree programs faded, however, as women moved into the mainstream curriculum. A more market-oriented administrator at that time might have foreseen the inevitable and pioneered women's studies or adapted the program to suit a different student population. By the end of this century, we may be casting about for similar alternatives, unless we begin to recognize now the potential for change.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Educational technology may well be the missing piece in the puzzle. Traditionally, telecommunications technology has been used to extend learning to off-campus adult students. Increasingly, though, people are beginning to see technology as a way to enhance as well as extend the learning

experience. Educational technology--as it has developed through use in adult degree programs--provides a new tool for general education reform that can be applied across the institution.

The typical telecourse provides an illustration. Most of us are familiar with the basic "30/30" telecourse, in which 30 30-minute video lectures replace classroom lectures. Through this basic model enabled community colleges (and, eventually, many others) to extend the mainstream curriculum to adults. However, as course designers became more sophisticated (and as distribution potential justified higher budgets) producers began to use video to achieve results that are difficult to achieve in the classroom. THE CONSTITUTION: THAT DELICATE BALANCE, for instance, used television to involve students in issues and to give them the experience of seeing constitutional issues evolve. To the extent that telecourses use video to achieve th goals of general education reform, they are useful--and are being used--on campus as well as off, with traditional students as well as with adults.

Moreover, the "newer" technologies--computer based instruction and interactive videodisc among them--also have the potential to help us realize the goals of general education. They offer new vistas for integrating simulation, problem solving, an decision making into the curriculum in a direct, immediately relevant way.

From film to videodisc, educational technology has long

had the reputation of being over-sold to education. However, tied to a generalized movement for reform and to the new realization of the adult student as a major client of higher education, technology may be a solution that has found its problem at last.

CONCLUSIONS

The opportunity facing those of us involved in adult higher education and in educational technology rests in the convergence of three factors: (1) the revitalization of general education as a reform movement in response to the need for higher education to reconsider its basic role in society, (2) the increasing visibility of adults as an important part of the total student population, and (3) increasing use of educational technology to shape educational experience rather than simply to extend experience. A basic goal of general education is to focus the curriculum on the development of the individual student's ability to solve problems, make decisions, and establish values--to function effectively in the many roles that adults play as workers, community members, parents,and individuals. General education recognizes that education is not just "preparation for life," it is a lifelong process. Adult educators have been dealing with these goals--and with the methods for achieving them--for decades. And, in the past decade, we have increasingly used educational technology to articulate these goals. The opportunity exists to move these factors into the mainstream of higher education. The adult degree program

can, in the process, become the laboratory for the revitalization of the curriculum.

This will not happen automatically. Indeed, it may not happen at all. The job facing professionals in these fields is to recognize the potential wihin their own programs and institutions and to communicate that potential to others in the institution. This may require giving up the benefits of splendid isolation in order to find a more lasting role to play in a transformed higher education environment.

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